

Reflections on Kenneth H. Cooper, MD, MPH

John Davis Cantwell, MD

Piedmont Heart Institute, Atlanta, Georgia

I first heard of Ken Cooper, MD, when I was an internal medicine fellow at the Mayo Clinic, working on an exercise study on patients with coronary artery disease. As a former college athlete, I had tried various programs to maintain fitness, such as the Canadian 5BX regimen, but had difficulty adhering to any. In 1968, I read about Dr. Cooper's new program and book, *Aerobics*, in a lay magazine and realized right away that it was a major breakthrough. Dr. Cooper had assigned aerobic points for a variety of exercises. As I recall, he advised that one try to earn at least 30 aerobic points of exercise each week.

In 1969, I was a cardiology fellow in San Diego. I had read that Dr. Cooper was giving a lecture at a fitness event in Long Beach and drove there to attend. Most audience members were participating in the various events. I was just observing in the bleachers, the only nonparticipant. Dr. Cooper's lovely, vibrant wife, Millie, saw me and came over to encourage me to be more active and to take part in the group activities. I listened to her spiel but didn't tell her that I was training for the 1970 Boston Marathon.

When I finished my cardiology fellowship in Atlanta in 1972, I flew to Dallas to interview for a job in Dr. Cooper's

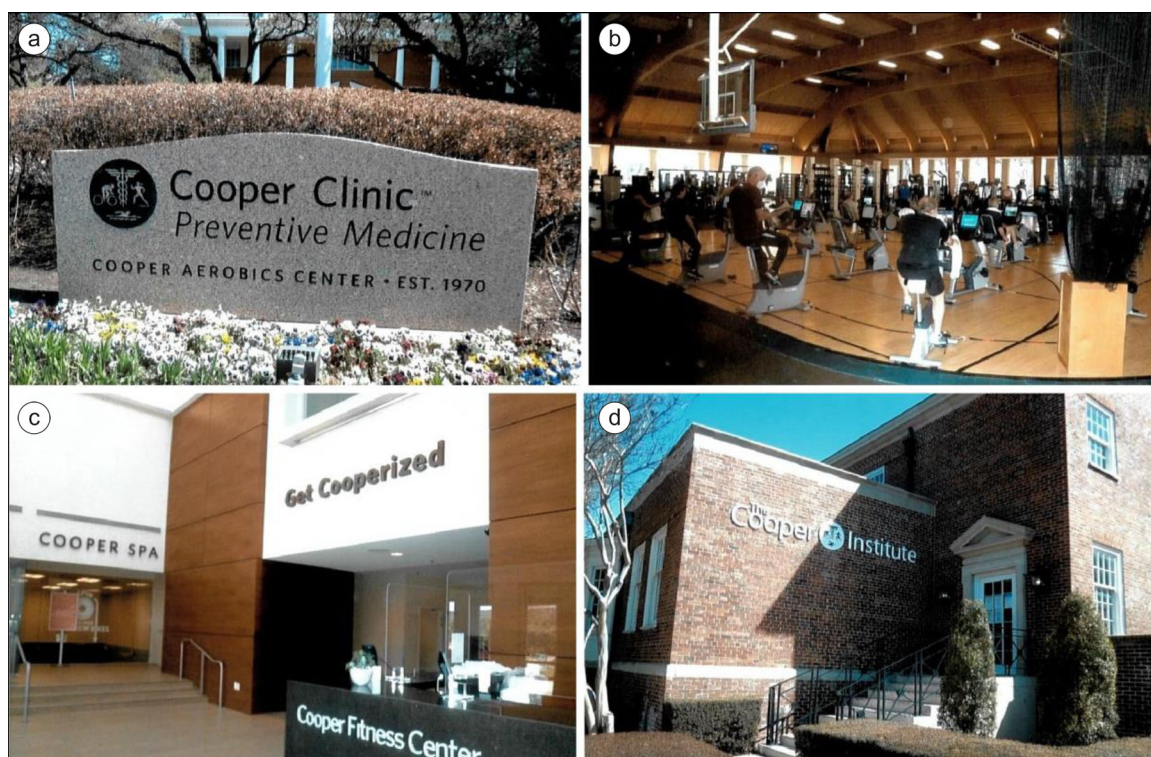


Figure 1. (a) The Cooper preventive medicine clinic. (b, c) The aerobic fitness center. (d) The Cooper Institute.

Corresponding author: John Davis Cantwell, MD, Piedmont Heart Institute, 275 Collier Road, NW, Suite 500, Atlanta, GA 30309 (e-mail: john.cantwell@piedmont.org)

Received May 3, 2021; Accepted May 6, 2021.

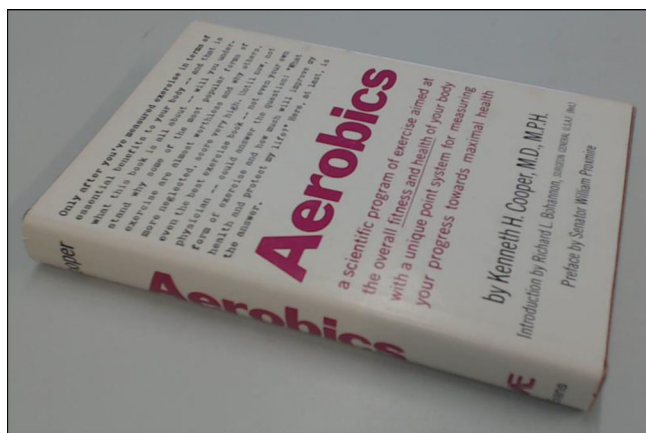


Figure 2. Dr. Cooper's classic, *Aerobics*.

new clinic. It was a very tempting offer, but I decided to remain in Atlanta to develop a cardiac rehabilitation program and to start my own preventive cardiology clinic.

Through the years, Dr. Cooper and I have kept in touch. He kindly invited me to attend the 30-year anniversary of the now famous Cooper Clinic. I thought back as to what he'd overcome. I recalled a meeting in Atlanta where Dr. Cooper was one of three invited speakers. He had to endure the diatribe of Dr. Herman Hellerstein, a cardiac rehabilitation expert from Cleveland, who stated that the only good thing regarding Dr. Cooper's book *Aerobics* was that when kept in a runner's back pocket it helped cushion the blow when the individual collapsed while jogging. Another guest speaker, Dr. Meyer Friedman (a big proponent of the type A personality as an important coronary risk factor, which never amounted to much), joined in the personal attack on Dr. Cooper. The major concern of University of Texas Southwestern Medical School leaders was that Dr. Cooper's treadmill stress testing was too risky.

Dr. Cooper not only endured the criticism, but prevailed, building the now world-renowned Cooper Clinic and Institute from two physicians on an 8-acre site to a magnificent complex on 30 acres, with 24 full-time physicians, six PhDs, and a staff of 450. It involves the preventive medicine clinic, a busy fitness center, and a nonprofit research institute (Figure 1). The latter has produced over 700 medical articles, with up to 50 years of data on 116,000 patients, 330,000 office visits, and 250,000 exercise stress tests.¹

Dr. Cooper has authored 18 books, including his original masterpiece, *Aerobics* (Figure 2). These have been

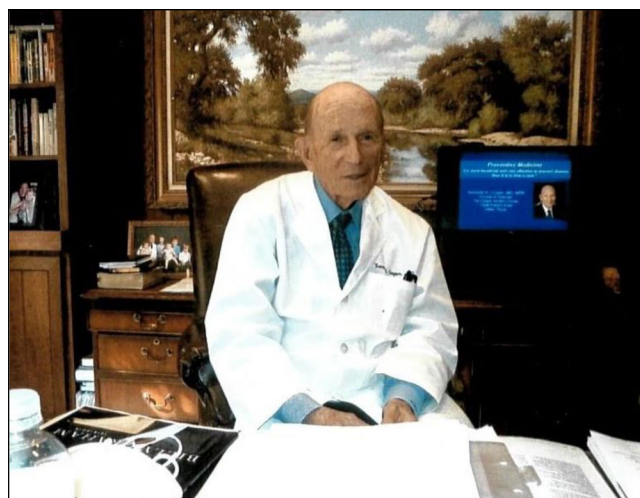


Figure 3. Dr. Cooper, still vibrant at age 90.

translated into 41 languages and Braille and have sold over 30 million copies.¹ He has lectured in over 50 countries. Since his work advising the 1970 World Cup champion Brazilian team, which featured Pelé, he has achieved rock-star celebrity status in the country, such that jogging there is called "coopering."¹ He has subsequently made 20 additional trips to Brazil and 13 to China (where he has a 30-acre fitness center).

Dr. Cooper has devised a FitnessGram, a method of testing and advising physical activity, nutrition, and wellness in schoolchildren. Over 500 schools in the United States (including one my granddaughters attended) have provided this, as have 2,500 schools in Hungary.

Still vitally active and energetic at age 90 (Figure 3), Dr. Cooper has recently been involved in studying the impact of inflammation on diseases, ranging from heart disease and cancer to Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disorder, and ways proper nutrition and supplements can counter systemic inflammation.¹ I can think of no other physician who has done more to promote good health and fitness than he has.

1. Stanforth D, Van Overdam J. Standing on the shoulders of giants: celebrating the success of Cooper aerobics. *ACSM's Health Fitness J.* 2021;25(2):51–56. doi:10.1249/FIT.0000000000000651.